

Joyful is the Dark

November 29, 2020

Older siblings can shape us in powerful ways, both good and bad. When a child starts to walk and talk is often attributed to their interactions with their older siblings. Depending on both children's personalities, sometimes the older sibling inspires the younger, as the little one wants to be more like their big sib. Other times, the younger child's development comes more slowly, as they're happy to let the older child do things for them.

One of the ways my older sisters shaped me was instilling in me a fear of the dark. I honestly don't remember being afraid of the dark, until my older sisters started talking about their strategies for keeping themselves "safe" in the dark. These strategies included making sure the closet door was closed before they turned off the light, and my favorite, which I think as a community of faith you'll particularly appreciate, singing the Lord's Prayer out loud as they ran through the dark church basement which for some reason did not have light switches at one of the entrances. They taught me that darkness was dangerous, to be feared, that the dark is where bad things happen.

This was reinforced by my hometown scheduling trick-or-treating in the early afternoon the Saturday before Halloween, Hollywood perpetuating myths of werewolves and vampires terrorizing people in the dark, and even my college enforcing gender-based curfews in the residence halls at night. In my upbringing, and I suspect in many of yours, light equaled good and dark equaled bad.

The church exacerbated this duality. Christ is light. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light (Isaiah). Advent candles dispel the darkness. Even my favorite verse, "The light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it." And while it is true that some with nefarious intent wait until nightfall to carry out their schemes, as our church actively and systematically engages in anti-racism work, the destructive and hurtful consequences of this duality ought to give us pause.

All too often the idea that darkness equals bad leads to the false narrative that dark people equal badness. Furthermore, when a child, or person of any age for that matter, consistently hears that the words that are used to describe them have negative connotations, that negativity seeps into one's soul. Lest we imagine this is a newfangled, PC idea, even Harriet Tubman and Carl Jung weigh in on it. Students of human behavior have acknowledged for more than a century now that our archetypes of good and bad and our symbology affect people's experiences of themselves and of each other.

And so, this year, this strange and difficult year in which so much is different, instead of focusing on the growing light in the darkness, as a church, I'd like us to embrace the darkness instead. Rather than pushing the darkness away, what if we work to see the beauty and power and mystery of the dark? Advent is too often portrayed as a count-down to Christmas, but even more, what it really is is a season of preparation for the manifestation of the in-breaking of God's very being into our weary world, when Jesus' followers push God's justice and hope out of themselves and into all of the places where it is needed. And while light and dark imagery is convenient here in winter in the northern hemisphere, light is not intrinsically divine.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in “Learning to Walk In the Dark,” asks, “What would it be like to trust the darkness, or trust God in the darkness? How can we learn to embrace darkness and what it has to offer?” And Leah Schade of Lexington Theological Seminary suggests, “Advent is the ideal time to explore these questions. We are moving toward the darkest part of the year, when the daylight diminishes and darkness grows deeper. This is a good time to gain a different understanding and appreciation of darkness. As Isaiah reminds us, God forms light and creates darkness.”

What if, instead of cursing the darkness, this year we center ourselves on the mystery of darkness, the generative nature of darkness, the intimacy of darkness? In Genesis, we’re told that God created both light and dark, and called both good. Two weeks from now, we’ll reflect on Mary’s womb, and the darkness critical for gestation of the Incarnation at its most vulnerable. Rev. Dr. Schade reminds us that God comes to Abraham in the darkness, that Jacob wrestles with God in the darkness, that Samuel’s call from God comes during the night, that Elijah hears the voice of God in the darkness of the cave, that Joseph and Mary and the Magi experience the divine in the darkness of their dreams as a revelation of God’s self and God’s purposes, and the list goes on.

In our Gospel passage today, “Mark tells us that when the sun is darkened and the moon is new and even the light of the stars is no longer visible — God will send the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Notice, it doesn’t say anything about Jesus coming in a great beam of light. Jesus comes in the dark, shrouded by mystery. He comes like the master of the house – when? Not in the daytime, but at some time during the night: in the evening, or at midnight, or just before dawn.” (Schade)

Again, I’m deeply indebted to Rev. Dr. Schade who points out that the Greek word Mark uses here is: *gregoreo*, which means “to watch, to pay attention.” What if, as part of our anti-racism work this Advent, instead of banishing darkness, we ask ourselves what in the darkness is calling for our attention? What if, instead of artificially plastering on a cold white smile, we chose to spend some time with darkness, even if it scares us a little? She doesn’t suggest we plunge in the deep end and risk our safety. Rather, she encourages us to try dipping a toe in the shallow end at first.

When the sun goes down, don’t immediately turn on the lights. Don’t turn on the TV. Put away your glowing cell phone. Sit in the darkness for a while. Try it just for 10 minutes at first. Listen to what darkness is saying to you. If fear comes, listen to it. If sadness comes, attend to it. If boredom comes, let your mind wander and whisper.

If you awaken in the middle of the night with insomnia, let the darkness lead you to prayer, to communion with God, to the Holy Spirit who overshadowed Mary in the night. Let the darkness lead you to the mystery of Jesus who comes to us in the evening, at midnight, at the darkest moment before dawn.

Friends, we do ourselves and each other a disservice when we focus exclusively on the light, for even that becomes a false god for us. I remember a few years ago hearing that farmers in Door County were fearing a smaller than normal cherry crop because of the unusually mild winter.

There had been too much warmth, too much light. The trees need a certain amount of dormancy, of darkness, to be able to bear fruit.

I also remember a church member at the first church I served, critiquing my use of the phrase, “someone who hadn’t darkened the doorstep of the church in decades.” Years before I would process just how destructive dark and light symbology could be within the souls of people of color, this church matriarch was calling me on my language. I’ll be honest, I doubt that I’ll stop using light and dark imagery completely, but I think celebrating darkness, reveling in and lifting up its beauty and power and potential is an important corrective with socio-spiritual implications.

As we wrap up, I’m going to shift focus somewhat, and share a picture book that was published last year. “The Shadow Elephant,” while a picture book, is definitely not childish. And while it doesn’t engage issues of race, I thought that as we engage images of darkness and shadows, and as so many people are struggling this season, it offers an important message:

“The Shadow Elephant,”
by Nadine Robert and Valerio Vidali

Some said the elephant was gloomy. Some said he was trying to hide his sadness. Some said he preferred the shadows.

The animals of the savanna wanted to find a way to cheer the elephant up again. Perhaps if they told a funny story?

The monkey threw himself into it and told the funniest joke he knew. The one about the banana stuck in an ear. It was so silly! It got laughs every time.

Not a smile. Not a sound. The elephant listened attentively, but remained in the shadows.

Next, the ostrich sisters gave it a try. They performed a dance they had invented called the Swing-Can-Can. The way they tensed their faces and twisted their necks was hilarious.

But the elephant watched them without so much as a twitch, and remained in the shadows.

Seeing that the elephant did not feel like laughing, the crocodile thought a treat might perk him up. He brought him a bowl of young acacia leaves - his favorite!

But that did not work either. The elephant blinked his eyes, sighed through his trunk, and remained in the shadows.

A small mouse who was scurrying by stopped. Out of breath, she asked the elephant, “Could I rest here next to you?”

“You’re not here to tell me a story?”

“No, I’d just like to sit here for a moment.”

(a couple of pages go by without text, then . . .)

The elephant asked, “You’re not here to change my mind?”

The mouse replied, “No, but if you’d really like to know, I’ve walked all day, trying to find a golden key that belongs to my sister. It’s the most precious thing she owns. I took the key without asking, and then lost it while playing in the savanna. I’ve searched and walked and searched some more. I’ve wandered so far that now I’m lost. I’m afraid that I’ll never find the key, nor my way home.”

The elephant sighed, gave a little hiccup, and started to cry. He cried silently, a flood of tears, like he might never stop.

Seeing him, the mouse started to cry, too.

Drained of his tears and feeling much better, the elephant took one step, then another, and emerged from the shadows. He walked slowly toward the mouse and said, “Let’s walk together. The moonlight will show us the way to your house.”

Hopping on the elephant’s back, the mouse said, “On the way I’d really like to hear your story,”

And the elephant responded, “I can try...”

Friends, as we step into this Advent season in which we prepare for the inbreaking of God-With-Us, Emmanuel, into all of the places of weariness and struggle, as we strive to live faithfully to the Gospel and God’s promise of peace, joy, justice, and love for all people, as we take up the anti-racism challenge to wrap our hearts and minds more deeply around the beauty and power of darkness as well as light, may we also have the grace to sit with those in the shadows, not trying to change them, but simply as companions on the journey, willing to sit with one another and acknowledge the sacredness of each other’s stories.

Alleluia and amen.

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Psalm 80, Mark 13:24-37
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